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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 003549

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2012

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SUBJECT: ASSABEEL: UNDERSTANDING JORDAN'S PREEMINENT ISLAMIST WEEKLY

REF: AMMAN 2559

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) The Islamist publication Assabeel ("the way" or "the path") is Jordan's most important weekly newspaper. Its circulation is small compared to that of the daily newspapers, but it has grown recently when other Jordanian weeklies have not. Insiders aver that the paper seeks to convey "quality information beneficial to readers." They style the paper as a critical opposition mouthpiece, positively directed at supporting reform in Jordan through conventional and democratic means. The paper, they say, is both lauded and reviled because it stakes out strong, principled positions on issues. Insiders at Assabeel claim the paper is independent. Other members of the media scoff at such claims of independence, and even suggest that Assabeel's staff reports to Jordanian intelligence. End summary.

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HISTORY, CIRCULATION, AND READERSHIP  
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2. (C) Members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) founded Assabeel in 1993, shortly after the advent of the MB's political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). Assabeel rose out of the ashes of an "official" MB newspaper, Al Ribat ("the tether"). According to Sa'ud Abu Mahfuz, Assabeel's General Manager and a member of the MB, Al Ribat failed in its second year because the MB controlled it too tightly. Abu Mahfuz claims Assabeel is, by contrast, independent.

3. (C) Abu Mahfuz reports that the paper's circulation has doubled to about 17,000 copies since September 2000. (Note: A former editor ousted from Assabeel in 1996 insists it has merely maintained circulation at 5-7000 copies over the past two years, and was in steady decline before that.) Assabeel employs fourteen people besides Abu Mahfuz; seven are journalists and the other seven work as secretaries, computer technicians, and office staff. The paper meets its operating expenses through sales revenues.

4. (C) According to Abu Mahfuz, most copies of Assabeel are purchased by women who take the paper home to large families. In addition, copies placed in any of Jordan's more than 3000 mosques may be read by scores of people. For this reason, Assabeel uses a large multiplier to extrapolate an estimated readership of 170,000 from circulation figures. Though one former parliamentarian surmises that Assabeel's hardcopy readership is confined to MB members, Assabeel insiders claim many party leaders, ministry officials, diplomats, doctors, educators, and leaders at mosques and churches read their paper. (Indeed, the Political and Public Affairs sections receive Assabeel weekly.)

5. (C) Assabeel's website reportedly has 1,000,000 hits monthly from expatriate Jordanians seeking an opposition viewpoint on issues within Jordan, government officials, and others in countries throughout the world. Thousands of hits originate from the United States.

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THE SECRET OF OUR SUCCESS: CREDIBILITY, FAMILY VALUES,  
"NATIONAL" APPEAL, AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS  
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6. (C) Abu Mahfuz attributes Assabeel's success to its credibility and authenticity as a news source. He even claims the paper presents U.S. views and positions evenly, and promised the paper would support Bush's June 24th speech if it turned out to be "fair." Abu Mahfuz said Assabeel's readership appreciates its "principled" opposition to the GOJ in instances like the sedition case of former MP Toujan Faisal (reftel). Assabeel openly criticized Faisal's imprisonment, even though Islamists had been the object of Faisal's vitriol in the past. According to Abu Mahfuz, the fundamental unfairness of Faisal's imprisonment made Faisal's prior invective superfluous.

7. (C) Abu Mahfuz also claims readers are drawn to Assabeel

because of its conservative "family" orientation. For example, unlike other Jordanian weeklies, Assabeel does not publish photos of women passing for Arab-World correlatives of Britain's "page three" girls. Assabeel bars advertising by establishments (e.g., banks and night clubs) promoting practices (e.g., usury and drinking) at odds with conservative Muslim ideology.

18. (C) Abu Mahfuz points to Assabeel's breadth of coverage as another reason for its increased popularity. A typical issue contains several pages of news and features treating a broad range of topics through the "eyes of Islam," whereas the content of other weeklies is more thin. Three of nine columnists at Assabeel are at least nominally Christian, though the practical effect of this on the paper's content is hard to detect. Regardless, Abu Mahfuz characterizes the newspaper as "national" (not merely Muslim) in its appeal.

19. (C) Abu Mahfuz acknowledges that regional developments help account for heightened sales. Circulation has generally increased throughout the Intifada -- while other weeklies have fizzled -- and it spikes in response to specific events on the West Bank. For example, Abu Mahfuz says bloody photographs depicting Palestinian suffering in Jenin during Israel's April insurgency greatly boosted circulation. Abu Mahfuz asserts that people are attracted to Assabeel's coverage because it is moderate and discourages violence, yet at the same time says some of the photographs it publishes incite "revolutionary" sentiment. The paper has also given positive coverage to Palestinian suicide bombers.

110. (C) Comment. Assabeel also panders to popular anti-Israel and anti-U.S. sentiment in other subtle (and not so subtle) ways. Assabeel stories, headlines, and captions consistently use pejorative labels for Israeli officials, e.g., "the criminal Peres" and "the terrorist Sharon." It frequently runs lurid banner headlines (in red ink) calling attention to the latest Israeli "atrocities" or Bin Laden statements. However, Public Affairs has obtained relatively fair and frequent coverage in Assabeel for U.S. speaker programs and Embassy activities. End comment.

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ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT: INFORMAL PRESS RESTRICTIONS, MARKET LIMITS, AND REPORTING QUALITY  
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111. (C) Abu Mahfuz identifies two factors "limiting" Assabeel. First, like all media in Jordan, there are unwritten restrictions on Assabeel's freedom of expression, which Assabeel observes in order to avoid "problems" with the GOJ. Assabeel claims to support positive change through conventional means, and does not publish material aimed at undermining the Hashemite regime, personally attacking GOJ officials, or exploiting societal fault-lines (e.g., East-Bank/West-Bank tensions and Muslim/Christian religious differences). (Note: On a personal level, Abu Mahfuz considers the Hashemite regime "an evil blight, forced on Jordan by colonial powers, in an otherwise holy land.") By observing limits, the paper retains the ability to criticize the GOJ on human rights issues and other topics.

112. (C) Second, Abu Mahfuz notes that Assabeel cannot -- at least in hardcopy form -- expand beyond its small Jordanian market due to the prohibitively high transactions costs of selling in other countries. (Note: Though Abu Mahfuz did not mention it, political sensitivities in other countries would also limit hardcopy distribution.)

113. (C) Sources outside Assabeel criticize its reporting. The former Assabeel editor describes the current crop of Assabeel journalists as bright, but young and inexperienced (because, he says, few experienced reporters belong to the MB). There is also a perception that Assabeel's treatment of international issues is especially weak. Assabeel uses the internet, releases from Hamas media offices, and sensationalist media outlets to cover external issues. Given Assabeel's limitations as a raw news source, one contact explains that the paper survives only because its opinion and editorial pieces are marginally better than those of other weeklies.

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THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE  
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114. (C) Assabeel's General Manager claims the paper is an independent publication, rather than "a bird crushed in the hands of the IAF or the Muslim Brotherhood." This may be true in the limited sense that the IAF/MB does not own Assabeel and the paper operates out of separate offices. Moreover, the paper criticizes the IAF on occasion. For example, Abu Mahfuz says Assabeel blamed the IAF for weaker than expected showings in student council elections held at some universities. Moreover, the paper reportedly criticized the IAF's boycott of the 1997 parliamentary elections. Abu

Mahfuz promises Assabeel will cover debate over the IAF's participation in anticipated parliamentary elections, but only after the GOJ commits to a date for elections.

15. (C) The former Assabeel editor agrees that Assabeel's content is not determined by the IAF or the MB. However, he says the content is controlled by Assabeel's founders (four Palestinian Muslims and a Palestinian Christian), who use the paper to air their pro-Hamas/anti-Palestinian Authority viewpoint under the cover of an organ most associate only with the IAF/MB. Sources note that the views expressed by Christian writers on Assabeel's staff do not differ appreciably from Islamist views, so that the paper does not present a distinct Christian outlook. Members of the media deride claims of Assabeel's independence, suggesting that Assabeel's staff reports to Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The Islamists who run Assabeel portray themselves -- and may see themselves -- as uncompromising "uber-journalists" wrapped in a righteous cause. They seem convinced that they conscientiously express their viewpoint in accordance with the highest professional standards, and appear to believe that the "truth" of their message fully explains Assabeel's popularity. But in Jordan, where opposition views are not always easy to air, at least in the media, some people may gravitate towards whatever opposition exists whether or not they accept all that the opposition stands for. Opposition dynamics -- combined with Assabeel's clear anti-Israel bias -- help explain why the paper is as popular as it now is, and also why it is not embraced more broadly.  
Gnehm